

Mid East

## Misjudging Arab Intentions

# Seeing & Not Believing

by Tad Szulc

An important lesson to be learned from the 1973 Arab-Israeli war is that blind disregard of hard intelligence assessments, unpopular as those assessments may be in the White House, may lead to dangerous self-deception. That is what happened earlier this year when the Nixon administration refused to believe that the Arabs, with Soviet support, were *actually* planning to attack Israel—though massive evidence was at hand that war was being prepared. To be sure, the war, the Soviet gains in the Middle East, the worldwide energy crisis set off by the Arab oil embargo and the consequent deep disarray in America's alliances with Western Europe and Japan could have happened anyway. But the West would at least have been readier for them had Washington been more attentive to the predictions of its own intelligence community.

According to senior officials these predictions were based on a detailed three-phase Egyptian attack plan that US intelligence obtained as early as last April.

The plan apparently was procured by the Defense Intelligence Agency through its network of military attachés and at once made available to other members of the US intelligence community as well as to the State Department and the White House. The Egyptian plan called for crossing the Suez Canal into the Sinai Peninsula under the cover of Soviet-supplied SAM-6 and SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles designed to neutralize the Israeli air force. This was the first phase, and it worked. The second phase provided for a follow-up advance and the capture of the Mitla Pass, opening all of Sinai to swift advances by Egyptian armor. This failed because of successful Israeli counter-punches after commanders and troops had recovered from their initial surprise. The third phase was to be the conquest of all of Sinai up to the 1967 armistice lines. Egypt never contemplated invading Israel proper, expecting instead to engage in diplomatic negotiations from a position of overwhelming strength. According to Eastern European diplomats, the Soviet Union flatly opposed an invasion of Israel for the reasons that it might have led to a direct confrontation with the US and, in the words of one diplomat, that Moscow's policy requires the continued existence of the Jewish state as a *raison d'être* for indefinite Soviet presence and influence in the Middle East.

After studying the Egyptian attack plan and related intelligence data—reconnaissance satellite photography, agent reports on the arrivals and deployment of new Soviet equipment, Egyptian army movements and its accelerated training in river-crossing opera-

tions in preparation for the Suez thrust—the State Department submitted on May 31 a detailed study, specifically predicting an Egyptian attack coordinated with a Syrian offensive in the Golan Heights to occur between late June and mid-autumn. The prediction of Syrian involvement was essentially a logical inference from what was known about Soviet military deliveries to Syria, inasmuch as the US intelligence community was able to get the actual Syrian attack plan only in the first weeks of September.

The study went to William P. Rogers, then secretary of State, and to Kissinger at the White House. As the President's special assistant for national security affairs, Kissinger had been apprised of the Egyptian military plan as soon as the DIA secured it in April. There are no indications, however, that he took this warning seriously in April or even after May 31, when State Department political analysts predicted the Arab offensive. It may be surmised that Kissinger, whose own prestige is so linked with détente policies with the Soviets, simply refused to believe that Moscow would make it possible for the Egyptians to start a war or that President Sadat's own interests would be served by such a conflict. It should be noted that the Egyptian plan was dutifully passed on to Israel. But for its own reasons Israeli intelligence services chose to be totally skeptical about it, thus perhaps reinforcing Kissinger's own political judgment.

Be that as it may, there is nothing to suggest that Nixon or Kissinger raised the possibility of a Middle East war when Chairman Brezhnev visited here during June on a mission that the administration portrayed as a further move toward détente. The Middle East was discussed, but the American side did not find it necessary, according to senior officials, to try to dissuade the Russians from engaging in any Mideast adventures. Interestingly the Egyptians told the Romanian government in April that they planned an autumn attack. The Romanians did take it seriously and tried to talk Sadat out of it. It is unknown whether they passed their information on to the US.

In September when Kissinger became secretary of State, another study was prepared informing him of the Syrian plan. The view in the State Department was that pressures in the Arab world, notably in Cairo, had risen to the point where Sadat was willing to undertake the attack. That Moscow, détente or not, was favoring the war for its own long-range objectives

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seemed to be confirmed by the new knowledge that Soviet surface-to-surface SCUD missiles, with a 160-mile range, had been delivered to Egypt, though without nuclear warheads. SCUDs were the kind of offensive equipment Sadat had been demanding from the Russians in mid-1972. Frustrated, he expelled Soviet advisers. By 1973 Moscow changed its mind. Yet in early October Kissinger was engaging Arab and Israeli foreign ministers in preliminary discussions of a Mideast peace plan.

The Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, advised Kissinger on October 5 that the Arab offensive would be launched the following day. Israel was immediately informed, but it was too late to do Israel much good and too late for American diplomacy to try to halt the war. Cairo later confirmed that 12 hours before the war, Kissinger urgently advised the Egyptians that Israel had no hostile intentions. State Department officials think that Dobrynin acted because Moscow wished to have all its bases covered and preserve as much of the détente spirit as possible. This, of course, came in handy when the Russians were ready to talk Mideast cease-fire a week later, the Arabs having failed to reach most of their objectives. Still, it appears, the Russians were playing at brinksmanship. Kissinger has thus far declined to explain what precisely led to the decision to declare a worldwide alert of US armed forces, on October 25, but many senior officials suspect that Kissinger may have overreacted on the basis of urgent Brezhnev notes insisting on Soviet participation in truce observation or enforcement, and inconclusive information about the alerting of Soviet airborne divisions.

In this connection intelligence community sources say that the alert was declared *before* the US had real "awareness" that the Soviets may have delivered nuclear warheads for the Egypt-based SCUDs. They say that the first indications that nuclear arms may have crossed the Bosphorus into the Mediterranean aboard merchantmen came during "the week of October 24" (it was a Wednesday) and the reports were inconclusive. They say that to this day there is no certainty that nuclear warheads actually reached Egypt; if they did, they were taken out almost immediately. This whole episode remains murky.

Broadly speaking the major misjudgment in Washington was between the *capability* and the *intent* of the Arabs to wage a war. The capability was known, the intent was minimized. Curiously the US and NATO fell into an analogous trap in 1968 when Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia. Western strategists had ruled out the invasion on the grounds that if the Russians really meant to move into Czechoslovakia, they would maintain total secrecy instead of engaging in highly visible maneuvers and exercises. The same thing happened with the Arabs in the Middle East. The new way to score a surprise is to make it so obvious militarily as to make it unbelievable politically.